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ABSTRACT

By highlighting the dreadful and avoiding the droll, nonfiction presents an unbalanced picture of the world and deprives readers of the benefits humor could contribute. Humor is needed in literature because it ventilates or disrupts oppressive conditions, it provides a different lens from which to view reality, and it provides hope, pleasure, and fun. While humor is a trend in current children's nonfiction, it has not assumed a substantial presence in award winning books. There is a need in children's nonfiction for books that show the value of humor as a means of coping with difficulties. (Contains 19 references.) (EF)

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No Laughing Matter: Where's the Humor in Nonfiction

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M. Zarnowski

No Laughing Matter: Where's the Humor in Nonfiction?

Nonfiction for children is a deeply serious genre. Here readers encounter life's miseries, trials, and stresses such as exploration and survival in the Arctic and Antarctic, feuds among scientists, assassination, prejudice, and pollution. Or we encounter serious topics such as child labor, unfair treatment of women and minorities, and religious persecution. What we do not encounter—especially in award winning nonfiction—is much in the way of humor. Where are the great guffaws, the belly busting laughs, the jokes…or even the comic anecdotes about real life? A student in my nonfiction class summed up the situation quite nicely when she said her reading in my course included orphan trains, child labor, the Great Depression, the Japanese internment, fires, hurricanes, volcanoes, Dust Bowls, and poisonous creatures. It was, she noted, getting pretty depressing.

Why Humor?

By highlighting the dreadful and avoiding the droll, nonfiction presents an unbalanced picture of the world. More importantly, it deprives us of the very real benefits that humor could contribute to nonfiction literature. It is, however, possible to envision a different type of literature—one that shows how humor is a resource for enriching our lives and helping us confront our problems. Humor can "lift from our shoulders the ever-present weight of seriousness" (Gutwirth, 1993, p. 124). A dose of humor can provide (1) ventilation, or "time out", (2) a different lens from which to view reality, (3) a sense of hope in the midst of despair, and (4) a source of pleasure. Let's think about what this could mean for nonfiction literature and its readers. Why do we need humor?

It Ventilates

Ventilation means taking "time out" from a tense and difficult situation in order to freshen or breathe new life into it. As a humorous mechanism it means creating a non-threatening, brief disruption or what's referred to as topsy-turvy. Here is a "breathing spell," a time-out that "relieves us from the very real and unshakable constraints of daily living," "a way of holding at bay the demons we fear by the safe passage it allows" (Gutwirth, 1993, p. 58).

A notable example of this can be found in Susan Campbell Bartoletti's *Growing Up in Coal Country* (1996) and in her current *Kids on Strike!* (1999). In both these books, the author shows us how children who worked in the coal mines of Pennsylvania actively disrupted the oppressive conditions. In these books, she describes how the breaker boys, workers who separated coal from refuse, communicated behind the foreman's back, using a system of finger spelling to talk. If they felt the boss was unfair, they would get even by throwing pieces of slate or rock at him when his back was turned, refusing to work, and running out the door while kicking up coal dust so that the foremen couldn't see them or even breathe easily. They would shut down the machinery by throwing wood into it. In one case, the breaker boys threw the boss into the swimming hole and gave him several dunkings. It was only when their conditions were met that "the boys climbed out of the swimming hole and went to work" (Bartoletti, 1999, p. 86).

But as Susan Bartoletti points out in a recent journal article, "…most children's nonfiction on the subject of child labor overlooks or at best, marginalizes the agency of children" (1999, p. 112). Yet, in truth, she states, "Just as adults did, children negotiated, protested, and rebelled against unfair working conditions and challenged dominant

authority and institutions—*but today's nonfiction seldom addresses that fact*" [italics added] (1999, p. 112). We need more examples of how the efforts of children and adults *ventilated*, disrupted, and shook up oppressive conditions in order to make them more bearable.

It Provides a Different Lens from Which to View Reality

Even in the midst of not particularly humorous circumstances, there is often room for humor, though this humor is subtle and low key. It is not a laugh-a-minute, sidesplitting humor, yet, as one educator put it, it fills children's "need to see that even in life's more serious moments humour has its place—not humour of the belly-laugh kind, but the sort which shows that life can be viewed through different lenses" (Mallan, 1993, p. 32).

Sometimes this can mean simply showing that there are other ways to view what seems inevitable. Counterfactual history, an academic sporting event in the field of history, provides historians the opportunity to consider how things might have turned out differently if different decisions were made. Here again, we turn the tables on reality with possibly humorous results. What if it all happened quite differently?

One of the few nonfiction authors to ask this question is Rhoda Blumberg. In *What's the Deal? Jefferson, Napoleon, and the Louisiana Purchase* (1998), she suggests that "this great conqueror [Napoleon], who declared that 'peace is opposed to my interest,' might have made Louisiana a well-populated French-speaking colony, aggressive enough to invade lands belonging to the United States, and powerful enough to claim regions that reached the Pacific" (pp. 116-117). If we push this a little further,

it's not much of a stretch to imagine that as a result of this we might be speaking French today and singing the Marseillaise.

It Provides Hope

Humor can be a source of hope during otherwise distressing times. Even when humor will not turn the situation around, it helps us deal with it by providing needed relief, a way a making the best of a bad thing. "Humor is one way of dealing with the confrontations we would most like to avoid: poverty, low social status, loss of a treasured friend or possession, inability to attain a sought-after goal, an unhappy family situation from which there seems no escape…."(Monson, 1978, p. 2).

Small bits of humor can provide relief from a distressing situation. In *Children of the Dust Bowl* (1992), author Jerry Stanley tells us that "to help survive the hardest times, the Okies [emigrants from the Oklahoma Dust Bowl] wrote songs. As they joined the caravan of rundown jalopies on the Mother Road, they would sing…" (p. 20). And in Weedpatch Camp, a Federal emergency shelter, "families would gather to sing and "pick," playing an odd assortment of instruments that clattered and twanged…" (p. 31), deriving courage and strength from songs that proclaimed "Tain't no use to sit an' whine" (p. 32).

We need more examples of humor that is not "the most obvious forms exploited by television sitcoms, cartoons and children's shows," (Mallan, 1993, p. 32) but the kind of humor that provides "a brief suspension of belief in the reality of the real, lifting from our shoulders the ever-present weight of seriousness…" (Gutwrith, 1993, p.124) and providing a "saving elasticity" (Gutwrith, 1993, p.130).

It Provides Pleasure *and* It's Just for Fun

Humor is a source of pleasure, and it has been suggested that we are wired for laughter—that it is "rooted in our physical makeup" (Gutwirth, 1993, p. 8). Humor has been referred to as "a blessing without which our lives would be but a spare outline of what they are" (Eastman, 1936, p. 5). As such, we indulge in it because we like it.

In *Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World* (Armstrong, 1998), the story of Sir Ernest Shackelton's attempt to cross the Antarctic continent with a crew of twenty-eight men, Shackelton finds a stowaway named Percy Blackborrow on board, resulting in the following conversation:

> "Do you know that on these expeditions we often get very hungry, and if there is a stowaway available he is the first to be eaten?"…
>
> Blackborrow was not dismayed. "They'd get a lot more meat off you, sir!"
>
> Shackleton turned away to hide a grin and told Frank Wild to turn the lad over to the bo'sun, but added, "Introduce him to the cook first!" (p. ll-12)

Such playfulness is for the sheer fun of it, but it also pays social dividends. "Laughter is," Max Eastman, reminds us, "after speech, the chief thing that holds society together" (1936, p. 4).

Humor in Current Nonfiction: *Stress* for Success

While the benefits of humor—(1) ventilation, or "time out", (2) a different lens from which to view reality, (3) a sense of hope in the midst of despair, and

(4) a source of pleasure are not absent in children's nonfiction, the question is, To what extent are they present? A look at this year's Orbis Pictus list of award winning nonfiction is instructive. The winning title and two of the three honor books focusing on the lives of individuals are all examples of the tyranny of the humorless vision—that is, they present individuals dealing with extremely taxing situations for long periods of time without the benefit of even subtle humor as a means of relief. To be fair, these books are notable in many other ways—for their important ideas and interesting content, for their clarity and descriptive writing style, for their interesting formats, and so forth. But they do not even suggest the use of humor as a means of coping. Instead winning authors seem to have a new motto—*stress* for success. By that I mean, authors show how persistent heroes—inspiring men, women, and children—struggle and succeed against the odds by the sheer force of will and strong determination. They keep on keepin' on.

In this year's Orbis Pictus winner, *Through My Eyes*, Ruby Bridges (1999) describes how she, a single black child was sent to integrate the William Franz elementary school in New Orleans, Louisiana. It is a story of being "swept up" by the events swirling around her. As Ruby tells us, "When I was six years old, the civil rights movement came knocking at the door. It was1960, and history pushed in and swept me up in a whirlwind" (p. 4). During the course of an entire year, she alone braved the taunts and curses, and the jeers and ugly gestures of an adult crowd. As the sole student in her first grade class, she was lonely and confused. This is an uplifting story of a girl whose persistence won out over bigotry and

injustice. As a member of the Orbis Pictus committee I not only voted for this book to win the award, I highly recommend it to you.

But I also recommend that you look for other books that show that there are others ways of dealing with jeers, taunts, and ugly defiance. And that way is with humor. So along with the story of Ruby Bridges, offer *You Forgot Your Skirt, Amelia Bloomer!* While the issues are clearly different, Amelia Bloomer is shown to have a sense of humor and spunk. When she sees things that are "silly," and unfair, she tries to change them. She thought the following things were silly: that proper ladies could not vote, were not supposed to work, wore heavy and dreadfully uncomfortable clothes, and suffered with corsets that were so tight they often fainted. So she thumbed her nose at convention and did her own thing with wit and flair. No, Amelia Bloomer was not six years old and she was not the target of hatred and bigotry, but she still provides and interesting contrast in confronting life's issues.

One of this year's Orbis Pictus Honor Books, *Clara Schumann* (Reich, 1999), describes the stressful life of this extraordinarily talented musician. Here is how the author describes Clara's father:

> Frederick was talented and intelligent, but he could also be demanding, controlling, and stubborn. He often lost patience with Marianne [his wife] and the children, and easily flew into a screaming rage. (p. 4)

Here is what Robert Schumann, who was later to become Clara's husband had to say about Frederick:

> Yesterday I saw a scene which I will never forget…. [Frederick] is surely a wicked man. Alvin had not played well: "You wretch, you wretch—is this the pleasure you give your father?" He threw him on the floor, pulled him by the hair, trembled and staggered, sat still to rest and gain strength for new feats, could barely stand on his legs anymore and had to throw his prey down. The boy begged and implored him to give him the violin, saying he wanted to play. I can barely describe it—and to all this…Clara smiled and calmly sat herself down at the piano with a Weber sonata…Am I among humans? (p. 37)

Now it is clear that Clara Schumann had a brilliant career as a piano virtuoso, and as the author tells us "to Clara Schumann, music was not only a gift that enabled her to bear the misfortunes of a difficult life, but a voice with which she could share her deepest experience of that life" (p. 100). This is an extraordinary story of grace, talent, and strength, and I recommend it to you.

But are there other variations of how artistic genius is nurtured in a more loving and even fun-loving way? *Savion: My Life in Tap* (Glover & Weber, 2000) is one such story. Here is how the Bruce Weber describes the joy of Savion's dancing:

> Watch him. Watch him for just a few seconds, and you count a dozen or more places on his feet that hit the floor and make different sounds: a whole rattletrap full of thwacks, clacks, tippy-tippies, thunks, sweeps, swishes, and slams. (p. 10)

And of the support of his mother, we learn from Savion that when a tap dancer at the Broadway Dance Center suggested that he should try to dance, "The funny thing is I

didn't say anything to my mom. She just signed me up. Me and my brothers. The next thing I knew we were in class" (p. 43). This is an alternative vision of nurturing artistic development that also should be shared.

A second Orbis Pictus Honor Book, *At Her Majesty's Request* (Myers, 1999) describes how an African princess was first captured and imprisoned and then about to be murdered when she was saved through the efforts of a British sea captain, Commander Frederick Forbes. The girl who later became known as Sarah Forbes Bonetta faced impending death at the hands of King Gezo an African king involved in the slave trade. We are told this grisly, true tale about a ceremony called "watering of the graves":

> Suddenly a scream pierced the air, and the men in Forbes's party looked to where a group of Dahomans were waving their guns in delight. The festivities had suddenly taken a horrible turn. Through an interpreter, Commander Forbes learned that the people he saw being carried in small baskets were about to be put to death. The ceremony was called the "watering of the graves." The victims, dressed in simple white garments, were to be killed and their blood smeared on the graves of important Dahomans. It was the Dahomian way of honoring their ancestors. (p. 9)

Sarah was to be such a victim, when she was amazingly saved by Commander Forbes. Her riveting story of rescue includes being sent to England. The African king would make a present of her to the British Queen. Sarah's odyssey—the story of an African princess in Victorian England—is the ultimate in anxiety and displacement. And Myers shows how unique this story really is by contrasting Sarah's life to the life of poor children living in London at that at the time.

But what of stories of families who are not uprooted, but instead who remain where they are and appreciate the tradition and the change that characterizes their lives? In *Century Farm* (Peterson, 1999), the hundred year old farm run by a Wisconsin family, children have fun playing with dogs and cats in the hayloft and avoiding their chores. Sometimes family members get to play golf in a field outside the house or go fishing or canoeing. Owner Cris Peterson tells, "My kids have grown up on this farm, just as I did, and my father and grandfather before me. They still play in the hay" (unpaged). Such a story of historical continuity and joy in living is a needed contrast to books with much bleaker visions.

These are but three examples of award winning books that show stress without the relief of humor. While they all make valuable contributions to children's literature and deserve will recognition and reading, we also owe it to our students to provide alternative ways of succeeding against difficult odds. A major way is through the use of humor. Humorous approaches *are* making inroads in the nonfiction literature. These, are trends to tend.

Trends to Tend: Humor in Current Nonfiction

While humor has long been considered by critics to be a trend in current children's nonfiction (Dowd, 1992), it has not assumed a substantial presence in award winning books. Yet, there are signs of change that should be noticed and encouraged.

Two books on this year's Orbis Pictus list do use humor. In ***Building the Book Cathedral*** (1999), David Macaulay revisits his earlier work. Twenty-six years after writing *Cathedral*, Macaulay takes the opportunity to rework the text and illustrations while also explaining how the book was created from the start. He does this with humor

and enthusiasm, telling us for example, "It wasn't my idea to build a Gothic cathedral. I was just trying to make a picture book about a gargoyle beauty pageant" (p. 7). Editors convinced him otherwise.

This large, graciously formatted book contains both the complete content of the original book as well as Macaulay's current reworking of it. Sometimes he shares anecdotes related to creating this book; referring to a sketch of a temporary wooden frame, he notes, "In the original sketch…I showed lots of workers. But since I still had many drawings to make and time was running out, I gave them an early lunch break" (p. 55). The actual drawing in the book shows no workers at all. At the very end of the book, he even shares this anecdote about revision:

> Sometime in June 1973 a proof of *Cathedral* arrived in a large envelope. There was no hard cover yet, just eighty pages stitched together and wrapped in a dust jacket. This almost complete version of the book produced primarily for the sales staff, gave me one final opportunity to make adjustments before the presses rolled. And I would have, if only I had known what to adjust. (p.112)

Such a good-natured discussion of revision surely deserves a place in the serious business of learning to write and illustrate.

A second book on the Orbis Pictus list that engages in humor is *The Snake Scientist* (1999) by Sy Montgomery. This book describes the work of Bob Mason a zoologist at Oregon State University. Here's how the author describes the work of Bob and his students:

> Outside the rambling prairie house that Bob uses as a makeshift field laboratory in Manitoba, Michael LeMaster, one of Bob's students, is weighing a plastic tub of margarine on a scale. The container's label says "I Can't Believe It's Not Butter!"
>
> You'd *better* believe it's not butter: a red-sided garter snake has just popped its head out through the small hole in the tub's lid. (p. 18)

The prairie house that serves as a laboratory is also the site for humor:

> The house doesn't seem much like a laboratory. But in many ways it doesn't seem like a normal house, either. At the top of the landing to the basement, out of the way of foot traffic, the researchers have carefully piled about a dozen pillowcases full of squirming snakes. Sometimes a writhing bag of them slowly cartwheels down the stairs. (p. 19)

So much for the view of science as the domain of stodgy men and women.

Conclusion

To return to my original question, Where's the Humor in Nonfiction? The answer is that it's popping up here and there, but there's not enough of it. Award winning nonfiction is overwhelmingly serious, with little letup. And while this can be awe inspiring, it can also be depressing. There are openings in children's nonfiction for books that show the value of humor as a means of coping with difficulties. I am not referring to a sprinkling of "fun facts," or cartoons, but to people who find enjoyment in life even when is something small—like Amelia Bloomer who thumbs her nose at conventional dress, or a tap dancer like Savion whose work consists of thwacks, clacks, and tippy-

tippies, or a bag of snakes cartwheeling down the steps of a field laboratory run by Dr. Robert Mason. Let's make room for fun.

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